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`Local food' zealots plant seeds of a trend

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"My destiny," Jim Slama says over organic brunch at Lula's cafe, "is local food."

My destiny, on the other hand, at least the one I would have predicted in my childhood, was powdered milk, boxed mashed potatoes and canned SpaghettiO's. That's what food was when I was growing up: stuff packed in a factory, shipped across state borders in a big rig and capable of surviving a nuclear blast.

But now comes "local food." It's more than just food, it's a movement. Slama is one of its leaders.

Organic food has already arrived, even in the standard Chicago supermarket, but, unfortunately, says Slama, too often it arrives here on the tundra from megaproducers in California, Florida, New Mexico or the Netherlands.

A few places break that rule, like this neo-bohemian cafe in the Northwest Side neighborhood of Logan Square, where at a tiny table under an old tin ceiling, Slama points to his corncakes.

Local organic corn, he says. And his bacon? Local organic meat. The cafe owner stops by the table to discuss his desire to make the cafe's own tofu, from, what else, local organic soybeans.

A few famous Chicago restaurant chefs are dedicated to local food. But until lately, restaurants and markets have had trouble hooking up with local farmers, who themselves have had trouble making ends meet. Ordinary eaters who like local food have had trouble too, outside the brief bliss of farmers-market season.

So Slama is out to bring everyone together. That's why he's organized the FamilyFarmed.org Expo this Sunday and Monday at Navy Pier.

The slogan is "Know your food. Know your farmer." You can meet local organic farmers, attend workshops, eat, watch cooking demos by chefs, including Oprah's, and, if you stay for Sunday evening's party, sip an organic martini.

"Vodka made from Illinois grain," says Slama. Olives, alas, from California.

Slama's destiny may be promoting local food, but his past was in financial planning. He gave

that up to found Conscious Choice, a free magazine. Years later, he gave up editing Conscious Choice to create Sustain, an organization focused on helping people relate more personally and locally to what they eat.

"This really is revolutionary," he says. "People yearn for this."

The "local food" movement may sound like the latest preoccupation of New Age nuts or of yuppies who'll trade a week's pay for a pound of organic baby broccoli.

To make the point that it's not, Slama leads me over to the Garfield Park Conservatory on the city's West Side.

Outside--though this is still a poor neighborhood--the grand boulevards and old stone houses are slowly being redeemed. Inside, under sunlight and the high vaulted glass of a refurbished greenhouse, stands Carl Grimm.

"It's so exciting to come to a place where this movement is fresh and new and people are having these `aha!' moments," said Grimm, who moved to Chicago from San Francisco three years ago to catch Chicago's green wave. "In the Bay Area, it happened 20 years ago. People in San Francisco are like: Organic? Of course. Local? Duh."

Grimm, who's an expo speaker, is an "organic gourmet gardener." He also teaches organic "backyard farming" to the neighborhood.

This Saturday, in this vast greenhouse, community groups will gather to plant seedlings--tomatoes, peppers, greens. When the weather relaxes, the plants will be transferred into yard dirt and the produce sold at open markets.

As Slama likes to say, "Organic food is not just yuppie chow."

With a little work, it's already possible to find local organic meat, dairy products, grains and eggs. Within a decade, Slama predicts, local farmers will be filling greenhouses with fruits and vegetables.

Meanwhile, he's just persuaded several Chicago supermarket chains to identify local products with the label "FamilyFarmed.org", which, by the way, is the Web site for more on the expo.

Why local food? At its best, it's fresher. It creates local jobs. It doesn't require so much gas to ship. It connects people to each other and the land.

It's a great idea. Though I still have a soft spot for boxed mashed potatoes.